

ASSEMBLY BILL

No. 716

Introduced by Assembly Member Huber

February 26, 2009

An act to add Section 722 to the Military and Veterans Code, relating to veterans.

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AB 716, as introduced, Huber. Veteran services: state agencies and departments.

Under existing law, the Department of Veterans Affairs has specified powers and duties relating to veterans.

This bill would require the Department of Veterans Affairs to establish a veteran data exchange system and enter into memorandums of understanding or interagency agreements with other state agencies and departments to ascertain the veteran status of all persons receiving services, benefits, or assistance from those state agencies and departments, as provided.

Vote: majority. Appropriation: no. Fiscal committee: yes.
State-mandated local program: no.

The people of the State of California do enact as follows:

- 1 SECTION 1. Section 722 is added to the Military and Veterans
- 2 Code, to read:
- 3 722. (a) The Legislature finds and declares all of the following:
- 4 (1) The United States Department of Veterans Affairs spent
- 5 \$6.1 billion in California in federal fiscal year 2006, \$2.66 billion
- 6 of which was for disability payments to veterans. These disability

1 payments are directly paid to veterans and generate a significant
2 contribution to California's economy.

3 (2) Unfortunately, only approximately 11 percent of veterans
4 who are eligible in California participate in these programs.
5 California ranks 38th nationally in terms of participation rates. On
6 a per capita basis, Texas and Florida collect 44 percent and 31
7 percent more respectively in disability benefits than California.
8 This difference is primarily due to Texas and Florida having more
9 veterans' services representatives available to assist veterans in
10 pursuing benefit claims.

11 (3) It is estimated that if California could increase the
12 participation rate to the national average of slightly over 12 percent,
13 over \$330 million more could be returned to the state and local
14 economy and paid to our resident veterans who need that money
15 to support themselves and their families.

16 (4) Unfortunately, the backlog of pending claims with the federal
17 Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is now approximately
18 600,000, due in part to the surge in claims from the Iraq and
19 Afghan wars, and consequently it can take the VBA years to
20 process and appeal claims.

21 (5) County veteran service officers and veterans service
22 organizations have assumed the primary responsibility to assist
23 veterans in accessing these federal benefits, but the funding for
24 this valuable service is scarce. Consequently, the California
25 Department of Veterans Affairs and other state agencies and
26 departments, as well as local government agencies, that come into
27 regular contact with veterans and returning National Guard
28 members must do a better job informing resident veterans and their
29 dependents of their eligibility for these benefits so that veterans
30 and their dependents can enroll and begin the application process
31 sooner.

32 (b) The department shall establish a veteran data exchange
33 system and enter into memorandums of understanding or
34 interagency agreements with other state agencies or departments
35 to ascertain the veteran status of all persons receiving services,
36 benefits, or assistance from those state agencies and departments.